

THE ENGLISH TEACHER

R. K. Narayan

(1945)

Story

The English Teacher was R K Narayan's third novel in his series of portraits of life in Malgudi, a small, south Indian town that served as the fictional setting for most of his work. Like all his fiction, the story appears slight, with somewhat stereotypical characters, but acquires a mythic depth and manages to combine sadness, insight and humour. Written only a few years after his own wife's death from typhoid, and dedicated to her, it is the most autobiographical of his novels.

Krishna is the teacher of the title, who works as a lecturer in the Albert Mission College. (At the time, most higher education institutions had been founded by Christian organisations, although they were not 'Christian' colleges.) He is bored and disinterested in life until he marries and develops a deep love for his wife, Susila, and their daughter, Leela. When Susila dies, Krishna is miserable and only stops committing suicide because he must take care of Leela. Later, he receives a mysterious letter from someone who claims to be 'in contact' with Susila and eventually holds seances in which Krishna talks with his dead wife and gains peace of mind. Meanwhile, we are introduced to Leela's school headmaster, who is a profoundly religious man and devoted teacher. So devoted, in fact, that he neglects his wife, who is unlikable in any case. When an astrologer predicts the exact day that the headmaster will die, he leaves his family to meet his fate, but the prediction proves false. In the end, the headmaster and Krishna both achieve a better understanding of themselves and the novel ends on a positive note of 'immutable joy.'

Themes

Colonialism While Narayan's fiction is never overtly political, in this novel he comes closest to making a statement about the evils of colonialism. The English teacher of the title has a moment of recognition toward the end of the book when he reflects that 'I could no longer stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan metre and Romantic poetry for the hundredth time into young minds and feed them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories, while what they needed was lessons in the fullest use of the mind. This education had reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage.'

Education The contrast between colonial and Indian cultures is dramatized through comparison of the westernised college system with the local primary school. In the college, the goal is to fill up the mind, whereas in the school it is to open up the mind. In Krishna's classroom, he tells students to 'shut up' and 'don't ask questions' whenever they seek clarification, while the headmaster believes that the 'business of education is to shape the mind and character of a child.' The headmaster's superior approach, which relies a lot on storytelling, is called by Narayan the 'Leave Alone System.'

Transformation Krishna undergoes a profound character transformation. After marrying, he begins to see that there is more to life than being disgruntled with his job. Loving his wife opens up his heart to a new and more optimistic view of life. Then, he loses her and falls prey to deep despair, even contemplating suicide. His desire to make contact with his dead wife leads him to a 'medium' through whom he speaks to her and learns to be more tolerant of people, to be courageous for their daughter and to change his profession.

Balance Both of the two main characters, Krishna and the headmaster, undergo a similar kind of transformation that results in a greater balance between the adult world and the children's world, which represent the external world of responsibility, on the one hand and the inner world of the imagination, on the other. In Krishna's case, he explains that he 'can't attain it [peace] unless I withdraw from the adult world and adult work into the world of the children.' It is the reverse for the headmaster, who learns to withdraw from the classroom and be more tolerant of adults.

Characters

Krishna Krishna is a bored, westernised college lecturer who goes through a transformation that is at the core of the novel. He marries and has a daughter, which brings him some joy, but his wife dies and he is again cast down in despair. Through spiritual means, however, he learns to 'communicate' with his dead wife, which enables him to survive and to keep his daughter happy.

Headmaster The school headmaster, who teaches Krishna's daughter, Leela, is the polar opposite to Krishna. He is thoroughly immersed in Indian culture, praying and meditating for 15 minutes before every meal. His philosophy of education also differs radically from the one Krishna feels trapped within. Nevertheless, the headmaster is not a caring husband or father and shows little concern for his family. Later, he too, achieves a self-realisation that enable him to live at peace.

Susila Susila, Krishna's wife, is an idealised image of the traditional Indian wife. Like the headmaster, and unlike her husband, she prays every day and has few material desires. As one graphic example, she washes her feet in the river, while Krishna wants to put in a tiled-bathroom. In this way, while alive and even after death, she provides the bridge that Krishna can cross from his colonial mentality to a deeper happiness in Indian culture.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

KRISHNA (Disillusioned)

Character Krishna is disillusioned with his teaching profession, in which he stuffs information into students who only memorise material in the days before the exam. Although fed up with his meaningless life, he carries on, not knowing how to change. In the opening pages, he compares himself to a contented cow regurgitating material in a dull, predictable routine. Then, with his dry humour, he adds that even 'a cow might feel hurt at the comparison.' Through his friendship with his daughter's school teacher and appreciation of his teaching methods, Krishna comes to realise that he is the product of colonialism. He is an English-speaking Indian who finds himself culturally hollowed out by the western education that shaped him and is shaping his students. He is an accurate and reliable but uninspired clerk, who must seek vigour and new ideas during his morning walk. Krishna begins to change when he marries a woman who embodies Indian culture and when he accepts the responsibility of being a father. In several delicately described scenes, we see Krishna's appreciation of his wife's goodness, beauty and serenity. He also begins to appreciate the headmaster's qualities and his philosophy of education. Krishna's love for his wife is measured by the depth of his grief after her untimely death. Again, however, this jolt stimulates change. Although he is not religious, he relies on a 'medium' to enable him to communicate with his dead wife and to reach, through her, a greater understanding of himself. In the end, Krishna says that he has 'a moment of immutable joy.'

Activities Krishna spends (or in his view, wastes) much of his time teaching college students. He takes long morning walks and reads poetry in the evening. He also spends time playing games with his daughter and teasing his wife.

Illustrative moments

Disillusioned Early on, Krishna articulates the nature of his disillusionment with his profession. Coming back home from teaching, having waited impatiently for the bell to ring, he reflects: 'I could no longer stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan metre and Romantic poetry for the hundredth time into young minds and feed them on the dead mutton of literary analysis...while what they needed was lessons in the fullest use of the mind. This education had reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage.'

Loving Krishna's tender love and respect for his wife is a strong undercurrent of the novel. In one moving scene, we watch him read a letter from his wife (she is living with her family until his salary is capable of supporting them both). Before opening it, he brings it his nose and smells it, trying to experience her sensual presence before he reads her words.

Serene Krishna's transformation from disillusionment to serenity is captured at the end of the novel. The inner calm that has eluded him throughout his life comes to him unexpectedly in the middle of the night. As Krishna explains, 'The boundaries of our personalities suddenly dissolved. It was a moment of rare, immutable joy - a moment for which one feels grateful for Life and Death' ('grateful for life and death' was Narayan's original title, which the American publisher considered too dark).

HEADMASTER (Devoted)

Character The headmaster of a local school provides a sharp contrast with Krishna, the main character and English teacher of the title. He is a devoted teacher and a devoted Hindu, who prays and meditates for 15 minutes before each meal. He is devoted to the children he teaches and calls them the 'real Gods on earth.' Unconcerned with material gain, he is content to work in a non-fee paying school and live in a slum, a 'grim place where the gutter gurgled.' He is not, however, as loving toward adults, with whom he is often rude and abrupt, although this appears to be the result of shyness rather than meanness. His flaws are shown most sharply in his unloving attitude toward his wife and children. His wife comes from a rich family and gave up a lucrative career as a lawyer to marry him and live in such difficult conditions. He, however, only sees her as 'dominating and bossy' and tries to avoid her whenever he can. He is similarly unconcerned about his children, even admitting that he has no idea where they are, maybe 'playing in a gutter.' In the end, after coming close to death, he reaches a better understanding of himself, which enables him to treat his wife with love and other adults with more respect.

Activities The headmaster spends most of his time teaching, telling stories and meditating. He also devotes time every day to meditation, praying and worshipping gods and goddesses. This routine undergoes a severe change when, toward the end of the story, he leaves his family and becomes a wandering ascetic because an astrologer has told him the exact day he will die.

Illustrative moments

Traditional The headmaster's traditional religiosity is demonstrated in an early scene when he washes his hands after eating. As Narayan describes it, he didn't use a cloth, 'leaving his face wet...hands dripping...to evaporate.' In other words, he is in complete harmony with nature and does not need the modern luxury of a towel.

Transformation The headmaster's transformation from a man who cares about children but not about adults is set in motion when an astrologer tells him that he will die on a particular day, not far in the future. The prediction turns out to be wrong, which stimulates him to rethink his life and have a kind of 're-birth'. This self-revelation releases himself from the demands of the school timetable, so that he can now embrace other people and love his wife and children.

SUSILA (Calm)

Character Susila is the wife of the titular English teacher, Krishna, with whom she forms a marriage of opposites. Whereas he is a dreamer, she is practical. If he is impulsive, she is controlled (perhaps too much so). He is the educated man who believes in modern science, and she is uneducated and believes in Hinduism. She is a minor character whom we see mainly through Krishna's eyes and who dies half-way through the book, and yet she is indispensable to the story. Although on the surface, she is the traditional docile wife, in reality she is not dominated by her husband and controls the family budget with firm hands. She is extremely disciplined, runs her life by the clock and is almost fanatical about the details on her shopping list. She is, nevertheless, a loving mother to her daughter, always putting her needs before her own. She draws on an inner core of strength, created by her anchoring in traditional Indian culture, in order to guide Krishna through his confused and bored life. During their short marriage, she seems to provide the bridge between her husband and the unpredictable world outside their home. When she dies of typhoid fever in the middle of the story, Krishna finds his life to be empty. In Narayan's words, he was left 'blind, dumb and dazed.'

Activities Susila is an industrious house-keeper, forever cleaning, tidying up, polishing, keeping accounts and making lists. She also likes to cook large amounts of food, perhaps as an expression of her individuality. She knits clothes, especially jumpers, and one poignant detail of her death is that she leaves behind a yellow sweater only half-finished, a fragment that Krishna looks at every morning.

Illustrative moments

Calm There are many moments in which Susila displays her calm control of situations, usually in contrast to the anxiety of her flustered husband. A particularly acute example occurs on a train platform, a favourite scene in Narayan's fiction, when Susila is returning to Krishna after having given birth to a baby in her parent's town. Krishna is pacing up and down on the long platform, counting the seconds as the train pulls in and finally stops. He sees Susila with the baby and screams, 'Give me the baby. No time for you to be carrying it while stepping off the train.' 'No,' Susila says quietly, 'I will

carry the baby down. And you will get those boxes [suitcases] down from the rack.' She smiled sweetly as she gave this order, and then once they were all assembled on the platform, she smiled again and said to those blocking their way, 'Give way, please.' Without waiting a second, the crowd of people parted and let them through. Narayan then adds that Krishna looked at his wife and saw that she was radiant with beauty. In this brief scene, we see that Susila manages to combine the role of gentle mother and wife with that of commander-in-chief, and still remain beautiful.

Precise Susila is not only a practical and efficient house-keeper, she is precise in all her calculations. We see this quality in a scene in which Narayan describes her activity in the kitchen. First, she sits down with pen and pencil and makes out her beloved shopping list. The date and time are neatly inscribed in the top right-hand corner. Then she draws vertical lines so that there are columns in which to enter 'item', 'amount' and 'cost'. Having carefully prepared this blank sheet, she next undertakes an examination of the food containers on the counter. Now her rapture grows as she checks the level of rice, sugar and various pulses [beans] in the containers. As Narayan puts it, 'She peered at each container like it was a sort of barometer,' as if she were a scientist or doctor, eyeing the exact level in order to get the experiment right. If anyone dares to enter the kitchen, while Susila is engaged in this sacred ceremony, they will be stared back out of the room by a glare that might frighten a wild animal.